

// CELEBRATING THE AMERICAN SPIRIT //

American Profile

americanprofile.com

OCTOBER 14-20, 2012

Horses *for* Heroes

New Mexico rancher helps
military veterans 'cowboy up'

+

Pat Croce's collection
is a pirate's treasure

MADE IN AMERICA
Viking Range cooks up
jobs in Greenwood, Miss.

Rick Iannucci of Santa Fe, N.M.

SOUTHEAST EDITION

**f WE'RE ON
FACEBOOK!**

facebook.com/
americanprofilemagazine

[COVER STORY]

Horses for H

New Mexico rancher helps

// STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARTA W. ALDRICH, FEATURES EDITOR

RIDING ALONGSIDE A FELLOW military veteran inside a dusty arena on his ranch near Santa Fe, N.M., Rick Iannucci watches attentively as Chris Chaisson seeks a comfortable tempo astride Aztec, a chestnut brown horse who is helping the wounded warrior rediscover the natural rhythms of life.

eroes

veterans 'cowboy up'

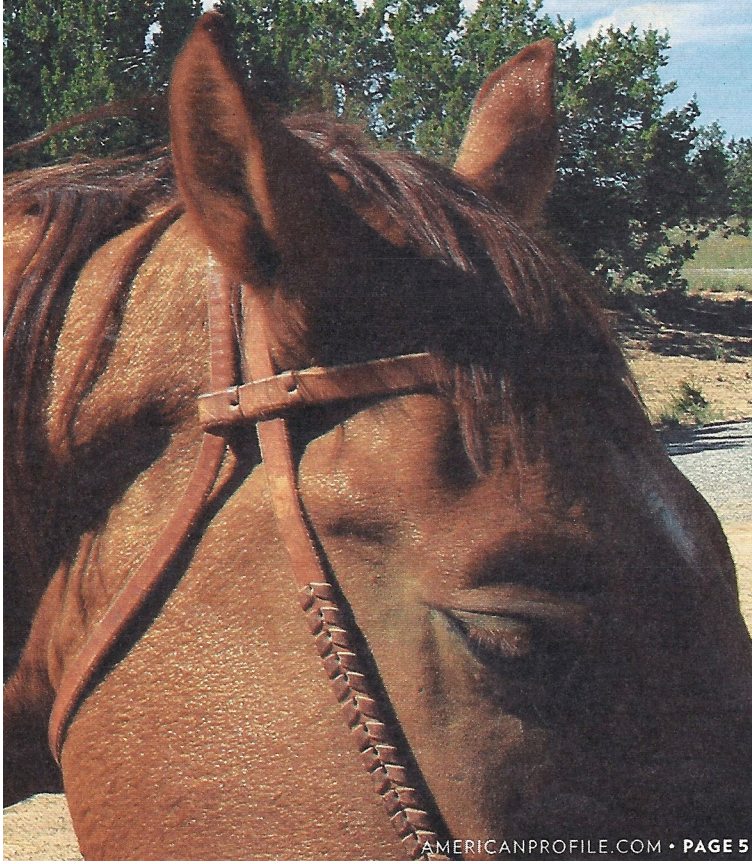
"Use your soft hands," instructs Iannucci, 59, reminding Chaisson, 32, that Aztec feels each slight movement of the reins. "Use your hands like you're conducting a symphony orchestra."

A former Green Beret, retired U.S. marshal and lifelong horseman, Iannucci uses horsemanship to help returning soldiers reconnect with themselves, their families, their surroundings and the civilian world.

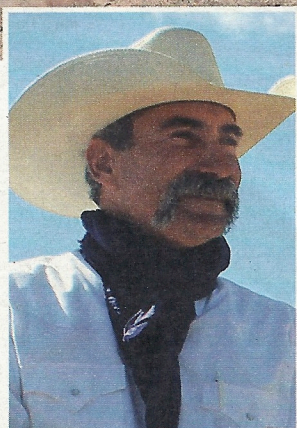
Beginning in 2007, he opened his Crossed Arrows Ranch to U.S. veterans who served in Iraq or

Afghanistan and carry both the physical and psychological scars of war. Using money

(Continued on page 6)



// Iraqi war veteran Chris Chaisson (center) develops riding skills with help from staff and friends of Horses for Heroes near Santa Fe, N.M.



“There’s nothing these guys can’t do if they get a new mission and ‘cowboy up’ a little.”

—Rick Iannucci



// Iannucci (center) confers with co-director Nancy De Santis and ex-Marine Mark O’Byrne about participants’ progress in the therapeutic riding and ranching program.

from his federal pension, Iannucci started Horses for Heroes—Cowboy Up, a nonprofit therapeutic riding program that helps struggling veterans to literally get on a horse and find a new mission in life. He charges participants no fees and receives no federal funding.

“When these guys and gals come home, they’re numb,” says Iannucci, walking his horse Hollywood to his stall after a 2½-hour riding session with Chaisson, a former Army infantryman injured in 2006 by a roadside bomb in Iraq.

“These animals serve as a catalyst to help our veterans connect with their emotions again,” Iannucci adds. “Horses don’t judge. They offer unconditional love and trust. And they’re very in tune and responsive to every movement of your body. They force you to be in the moment.”

Wounded spirits

The peaceful high desert of Crossed Arrows Ranch is soothing to combat-worn soldiers, whether they have lost an arm in an explosion or carry the invisible wounds of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition resulting from experiencing or seeing a traumatic event.

“Here, we call it post-traumatic spiritual disorder,” says Iannucci, noting that America’s newest veterans endured some of the longest overseas deployments in history. “These guys have seen so many days in intense combat, it wounds their spirit. We try to start the healing process so that they can have faith again in themselves, faith in others and faith in God. There’s nothing these guys can’t do if they get a new mission and ‘cowboy up’ a little.”

While serving with the National Guard in Iraq, Chaisson suffered bomb-related injuries to his face, knee and back, as well as balance and concentration issues caused by a traumatic brain injury. He came to the ranch in 2011 seeking treatment that doesn’t come in a bottle of prescription pills.

“I had gone from working as a police officer reservist to not being able to do anything. Everybody thought I was really screwed up,” says Chaisson, of Rio Rancho, N.M. “But here, I can sit around the campfire and have a cup of coffee and talk with other veterans. And when I get my horse to turn on a dime, there’s nothing better. He trusts me and I trust him, and that’s huge.”

Riding therapy is effective because one-on-one interaction between horse and rider stimulates mental and emotional growth at an appropriate pace for each veteran, says Nancy De Santis, 42, a certified riding instructor and co-director of Horses for Heroes.

“Horses are quite spiritual animals,” she says. “When you groom a horse and feel its heart beat, hear it breathe and see its flesh twitch when a fly lands on it, you’re connecting with something greater. These creatures help our veterans to get back in touch with a living being, which helps them to connect better with their spouses, friends and all of society.”

Saddle up!

The program assists about a dozen participants at a time and has served several hundred veterans or active-duty service members since Iannucci found his own new mission after working 20 years as a U.S. marshal. Thanks to private donations and business and community partnerships, a bunkhouse constructed this year enables participants to enjoy longer, uninterrupted visits to the ranch. Many program graduates return to help incoming veterans learn the ropes of ranching.

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued from page 6)

“We’re basically a small working ranch,” says Iannucci, who keeps a half-dozen quarter horses and a half-dozen cattle on his land. He partners with larger nearby ranches to let his cowboys- and cowgirls-in-training do chores—from shoveling manure and mending fences to grooming horses and branding cattle.

“They may not end up becoming a working cowboy,” says Iannucci, a member of the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association. “But once they learn how to re-tool their military skills to

work in a different setting, they can adapt those skills in other ways, too.”

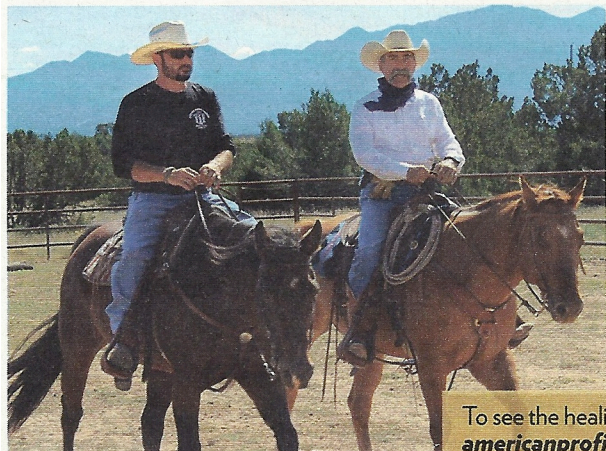
Having soldiered 10 years as a Green Beret and worked on several ranches, Iannucci knows how to integrate military principles, skills and language into ranch life—whether commanding a cattle roundup as if it’s a foot patrol, treating horses like “battle buddies,” or insisting on proper care and storage of gear before heading to chow time.

“On a ranch, you get sized up all the time, just like at boot camp. Who do you want to be in a foxhole with?” Iannucci says. “These people were wonderful troops, and we honor the skills they brought from their military service.”

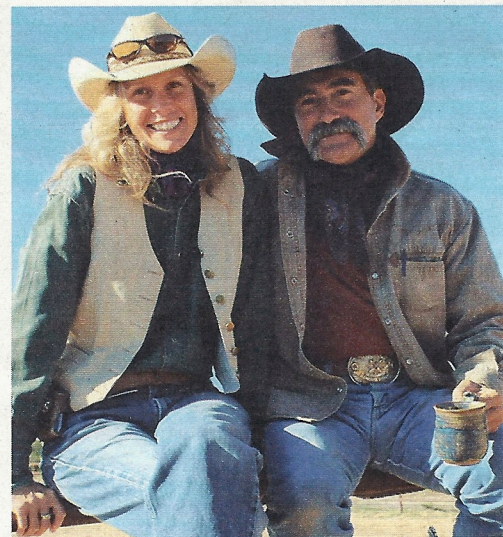
Mark O’Byrne, a former Marine and experienced horseman from Henderson, Nev., says his time assisting fellow veterans on the ranch gave him a new mission while grappling with his own transition to civilian life.

“A lot of them are suicidal and drinking and doing drugs and going

// A lifelong horseman, Iannucci instructs Chaisson at Crossed Arrows Ranch.



To see the healing power of horses, visit americanprofile.com/horsesforheroes



// De Santis and Iannucci oversee the nonprofit program.

downhill,” says O’Byrne, 25, who initially turned to alcohol to cope with guilt over surviving two tours of duty in Iraq, while many of his buddies didn’t.

“But this place is about honor and camaraderie and brotherhood,” he adds. “We ride together and put in an honest day of work and know at day’s end that we’ve done good.” ★